



Joyce Carol Oates

Missing Mom
ISBN13: 9780060816223

Q: Missing Mom relates a daughter's worst nightmare: discovering that her mother has been brutally murdered. How did you arrive at this idea for your book?

A: When my brother called to inform me, on the morning of May 22, 2003 that our mother Caroline Oates had died suddenly of a stroke, it was a shock from which, in a way, I have yet to recover. This "worst nightmare" is an experience I needed to objectify in a way that could be communicated dramatically.

Q: What were you most interested in exploring in this novel?

A: I was most interested in exploring the ongoing process of grief and mourning which remain a mystery even to those who have experienced it.

Q: Gwen Eaton is a woman of many talents, no enemies, and a seemingly boundless desire to reach out to others in need. Is she modeled on any women you know?

A: Gwen Eaton is very much modeled after my mother Caroline Oates, even including her physical characteristics. Her "upbeat" personality, her personal warmth and instinct for sympathy, her homemaking skills, cooking, sewing, gardening, "arts and crafts" of every kind, friendships with other women, and all the rest. Both she and my father baked bread. Like Gwen Eaton, my mother was enormously supportive of my writing; she and my father kept scrapbooks something like those kept by Gwen Eaton of her daughter Nikki's journalism career.

Q: In Missing Mom, Gwen Eaton hires a down-on-his-luck Ward Lynch to help her with some projects around the house, much in the way that Elizabeth Smart's family hired her abductor off the street to work at their home in the months prior to her well-publicized kidnapping. Was this case (or others like it) on your mind when you wrote Missing Mom?

A: No, I wasn't aware of this parallel. (I think I might have written Missing Mom before the Smart case.) However, it's a depressingly familiar irony: the naïve charitable intentions of "good" people who believe that, consorting with people very different from themselves, they can overcome the antisocial or hostile tendencies in others.

Q: You've described "the emotional interdependence of humans and animals" in the context of the characters in your novel, We Were the Mulvaney's. Can you discuss the role Smoky the cat plays for Nikki in Missing Mom?

A: Smoke, Gwen's beloved if not very attractive tom cat, is one of Nikki's strong links with her mother. He is a cat you come to love if you love him despite some of his quirky traits, as we come to love people who are far from perfect.

Q: At the beginning of the novel, your narrator states: "This is my story of missing my mother. One day, in a way unique to you, it will be your story, too." Is Missing Mom meant to appeal especially to anyone who has faced or is facing the prospect of losing her mother?

A: The relationship between parents and children, but especially between mothers and daughters, is tremendously powerful, scarcely to be comprehended in any rational way. Among many of my friends and acquaintances, I seem to be one of the very few individuals who felt or feels no ambivalence about my mother. All my feelings for my mother were positive, very strong and abiding.

Q: Nikki's last words to her mother are: "Mom, you are not me, and I am not you." But in the process of grieving for her mother, Nikki effectively transforms herself into her mother by moving back into her house and taking on many of her activities. Why does Nikki react this way?

A: Nikki comes to realize that her mother was actually right about many things that Nikki couldn't acknowledge at the time. Nikki had been living an essentially superficial, immature, as she says "slapdash" life out of a fear of not measuring up to her mother (whom everyone in Mt. Ephraim felt they knew, completely); by the novel's end, Nikki's confidence has been wounded, and she understands how much she needs others, how emotionally dependent she is. (A realization that is true for most of us.)

Q: The romantic prospects Nikki has in Missing Mom—Wally Szalla, Sonny Danto, her brother-in-law, Rob Chisholm, and Detective Ross Strabane—seem secondary compared to the importance of Nikki's focus on her mother in the aftermath of her murder. But the end of your novel suggests that her relationship with Strabane enables Nikki to get over her grief. What about Strabane allows Nikki to get over her loss?

A: Strabane is the ideal man for Nikki: devoted to truth-seeking and protecting; an individual of integrity; both like and unlike her own father; stubborn, courageous, loyal, steadfast. "A man who doesn't easily give up" a man whose taste in clothes will require her attention.

Q: What is your next project?

A: My next project is *High Lonesome: New & Selected Stories 1966-2006*.